

Permanency for Children: Concurrent Planning Practice Bulletin

JULY 2008



Permanency Needs of Children in Child Welfare¹²:

Concurrent planning is an approach that seeks to eliminate delays in attaining permanent family placements for children in foster care. Concurrent Planning is a process of working towards reunification with parents while at the same time establishing an alternative or contingency back-up plan for permanent placement. Concurrent rather than sequential planning efforts are made to more quickly move children from the uncertainty of foster care to the security of a safe and stable permanent family.

Components of Effective Concurrent Planning:

- ❑ Individualized and early assessment of the core conditions that led to out-of-home placement, the strengths of the family, and prognosis, the likelihood of reunification within 12 -15 months;
- ❑ Early paternity determination;
- ❑ Early aggressive search for birth family resources for achieving permanency.
- ❑ Early identification and consideration of all permanency options.
- ❑ Frequent and constructive use of parent-child visitation as part of the reunification efforts.
- ❑ Full disclosure to the parents of problems, changes, possible consequences, timelines, and alternative permanency decision making;
- ❑ Initial placement with a relative or foster/adopt family who can, if necessary, become the permanent home of the child;
- ❑ Effective and timely court hearings with firm timelines for permanency decision making; during which time, documented steps are taken to achieve reunification **and** an alternative permanency option;

- ❑ Involvement of foster/adoptive and kinship caregivers in teaching and skill-building with birth parents;
- ❑ Case planning that includes early and targeted strategies for family change to improve parental capacity and move to safe case closure and permanency for the child;
 - Identified things that must change within the family situation in order to keep children safe and the family functioning at a level necessary to achieve and maintain the safety and well-being of the children without the supervision of the child protection worker;
 - Ways the family, the court, and child protection worker will know when the family change process has been adequately completed;
 - Identified combination and sequence of strategies developed with the family to bring about the necessary change. Strategies for family change must match the assessed needs and be of sufficient intensity and duration;
- ❑ Ongoing evaluation of progress, tracking and adjusting, to find what works for the family; lack of progress suggests that planned strategies are either wrong or under-powered;
- ❑ When reunification is not possible within a reasonable timeframe, taking steps to finalize the alternative permanency option.

Benefits:

- ❑ Fewer moves for kids;
- ❑ Placement with a permanent family more quickly;
- ❑ Fewer problems of attachment and trust;
- ❑ Strategies and services matched to the needs of families offers the best opportunity for changing the behavioral patterns that led to the child's removal.

Research:³

Child and Family Service Reviews have linked concurrent planning with positive results in:

- ❑ Reducing time to permanency and establishing the appropriate permanency goal;
- ❑ Enhancing reunification and adoption efforts by engaging parents;
- ❑ Reduced time to adoption finalization

Recent research offers support for the approach, especially with younger children.

Anecdotal evidence within the literature also suggests that openness and direct communication between birth parents and caregivers may lead to more voluntary relinquishments and open adoptions.

Factors found to decrease time to permanency include:

¹ Implementing Concurrent Planning, <http://muskie.usm.maine.edu/helpkids/rcpdfs/concurrent.pdf>

² Concurrent Planning: What the Evidence Shows, http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/issue_briefs/concurrent_evidence/concurrent_evidence.pdf

Compiled by the Child and Family Services Division, Iowa Department of Human Services

³ Concurrent Planning: What the Evidence Shows, http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/issue_briefs/concurrent_evidence/concurrent_evidence.pdf



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- Caseworker consistency. One worker change reduced the odds of attaining permanency within the year by 52%.
Fewer Placements. Each additional placement reduced the odds by 32%.
Adequate family financial resources. Extremely poor families were 90% less likely to achieve permanency in 12 months.
More days of parental visitation per week. Each day of visitation tripled the odds of permanent placement within 12 months.
Clear identification of the concurrent plan in the written case plan and family involvement in case planning.

Research impacting supervision:

Westat & Chapin Hall Center for Children 2001, and Urban Institute 2001, found that:

- Caseworkers believed concurrent planning is fair, necessary, and helps move children more quickly to permanency; but
Concurrent planning is stressful for workers and requires more information to determine various permanency options early in the case;
Caseworkers often have difficulty grappling with the tension inherent in attempting to reunite a child with his or her family while also working on an alternative permanent plan.

To mitigate the inherent conflict, supervisors must help caseworkers:

- Understand the dynamics underlying child maltreatment and be skilled in conducting differential assessment;
Accept the philosophy of concurrent planning and believe that it is possible to work in good faith with parents while at the same time planning for an alternative permanency goal.
Develop the skills to work with parents and other professionals to plan and deliver targeted services and assess progress toward goals [Lutz, 200; Westat & Chapin Hall for Children 2001]

Supervisor play a key role in promoting collaboration among service recipients, providers, and others involved in each case. Concurrent planning requires that supervisors have the time, and skills necessary to involve themselves closely in clinical consultation and assist in timely decision-making.

Expectation: PERMANENCY: The case plan is the primary means of conveying permanency goals and back-up plans or concurrent goals. Permanency goals are also reviewed and documented by the court. URGENCY is required to assure timely permanence. Concurrent Planning is the primary mechanism to decrease time to permanence by having key permanency decision made and acted on so that the child has a permanent family as soon as it is clear the child cannot return to the parental home. For CFSR, the following items are impacted by concurrent planning practices;

Compiled by the Child and Family Services Division, Iowa Department of Human Services

- Item 6: Stability of foster care placement.
Item:7: Permanency goal for the child
Item 8: Reunification
Item:9: Timely adoption
Item 14: Preserving connections
Item 15: Placement with relative
Item 16: Relationship of child in care with Parents
Item 17 Needs and service of child, parents, foster parent/caregiver
Item 18: Child and family involvement in case planning.

Concurrent and permanency planning service activities -

Examples of expected service activities could include, but are not limited to working with parents to accept and help support movement to other permanency plans for their children, identifying potential relative placements for children and supporting transition of the child to this placement, helping identify potential adoptive or guardianship placements for a child, and providing pre-placement activities designed to achieve placement, working to support the successful transition of children to new school settings when their placements change; and working to support and maintain the placement of children in settings such as foster family, guardianship, or adoptive family settings.

Practice Tips:

- Engage Parents in Decision Making: Make the concurrent plan another decision that the parents help make in the normal course of developing a case plan.
Utilize a Concurrent Planning Checklist: See last page.
Family Team Decision Making: Put on the agenda, for the team meeting, developing a back up plan for permanency. Define the "back up plan" as a parent's opportunity to participate in an important decision.... what will happen with their children? Tell parents you want them involved in determining who will take care of their children if for some reason they are unable to? Discuss with the parents the results of not establishing permanency for children. Agree with parents that although the back-up plan may not be needed, until they demonstrate the identified behavioral and family change, working on a back up plan is in the best interest of the child.

Parent Ambivalence about Parenting

Deeply felt or consistent ambivalence about parenting is an indicator that a parent may have serious difficulties in fulfilling the parent role and responsibilities. Many unsuccessful reunifications may be avoided when workers specifically identify and explore parent's ambivalent feelings about parenting. A study conducted by Peg McCartt Hess and Gail Folaron* defines ambivalence as: "A pattern of verbal statements that reflect conflicting feelings about parenting, about a particular child, and/or about a child's return home; or a pattern of behaviors that is



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inconsistent with the parents stated interest in the child's return (visitation, court attendance, and service use)." (pg. 2)

Social workers need to be vigilant in recognizing and identifying parental ambivalence to prevent unsuccessful reunification attempts. Workers must also be willing to explore their own values about parenting and their own ambivalence about parenting options other than reunification. Workers must assure that they are not projecting their own values on the parents or letting their own ambivalence about permanency options interfere with viable options for the child..

When ambivalence is identified as an issue with a parent, it must be explored. Hess and Folaron state:

"Workers must be willing to identify and explore, initially and ongoing, the parent's feelings about each child, about parenting generally, and about all options for each child's permanent care. When all options are not discussed, the worker and the family act on the possibly erroneous assumption that the parents want to continue to care for each of their children permanently." (pg.15)

Case Permanency Plan Example

Parental ambivalence should be addressed in the case plan and is an integral part of concurrent planning. An example** of the concern, the outcome, and strategy language that would be included in the case plan follows:

Area of Concern: Mary says it is too hard and unrewarding to be a parent. She also says she may have made a mistake when she did not have an abortion and frequently refers to Ashley as "the mistake." She has not scheduled visits to date. She states she loves Ashley but discusses her own problems rather than making specific plans for visits or for Ashley to return home. It appears Mary can't decide about whether she wants to parent Ashley.

Outcome:

Mary will decide within 10 weeks whether she can parent Ashley in a safe, nurturing home as evidenced by complying with the permanency plan strategies or Mary will agree to voluntary termination of parental rights. Mary's decision will be measured by her successful completion of the strategies and a clear statement of her intent.

Strategies

- A. Within two (2) days, Mary will meet with the caseworker to explore her feelings about Ashley, her feelings about parenting, and options for Ashley's permanent care. A list of parental behavioral indicator and necessary changes will be developed at this meeting, which Mary will need to demonstrate prior to return of her child to her care.
B. Within one (1) week Mary will meet with and provide the caseworker with a schedule of her work and monthly appointments in order to develop two [2] 4 hour visitations per week with her child beginning DATE.
C. Within one (2) weeks Mary will participate in a family team meeting to establish a family plan, including family strengths,

identified needs and services to meet those needs, and a concurrent goal for the next three months. Services and demonstrated behavioral change will be monitored and review monthly by the caseworker.

- D. Mary will attend the Parent Empowerment Series with Ashley beginning DATE and provide copies of completed booklet to the Social Worker within eight (8) weeks. Within two (2) weeks of Mary completing the class, the social worker will review the workbook with Mary and discuss her decision and commitment for reunification.

Resources and Technical Assistance

*McCartt Hess, P. and Folaron, G. (1991). Ambivalences: a Challenge to Permanency for Children. Child Welfare League of America. 0009-4021/91/040403-22

** Case Plan Example developed during the Tools for Permanency: Concurrent Permanency Planning Workshop by Debbie Harbour, Davis County, Eric Erickson, Appanoose County, Georgetowne Alexander, Appanoose County, Marcia Benjamin, Monroe county, Gisele Chapman, Appanoose County and Melanie Seals, Appanoose County.

**Implementing Concurrent Planning, http://muskie.usm.maine.edu/helpkids/rcpdfs/concurrent.pdf

**Concurrent Planning: What the Evidence Shows, http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/issue_briefs/concurrent_evidence/concurrent_evidence.pdf

**Parental Ambivalence is presented by Janyce Fenton and Jill Welt as part of the DHS training Tools for Permanency: Concurrent Permanency Planning Workshop





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CONCURRENT PLANNING CHECKLIST
Iowa Department of Human Services

Table with 3 columns: Action, Timeframe, and a checkmark column. It lists 10 actions related to concurrent planning, such as 'Develop a visitation plan', 'Make a comprehensive assessment', and 'Practice full-disclosure', with corresponding timeframes like 'Immediate and Ongoing' or 'First 30-90 days'.